

Family Heirlooms by TheMikeWheelers (jasongracefully)

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Summary:

A moment between El and Hop in the parking lot before the Snow Ball

Family Heirlooms

“And I will be right outside the whole time, you hear me?”

“Okay, okay,” El whined. She could hear some song she recognized from the radio as Olivia Newton-John echoing through the walls of the school. She thought about all her friends just a few paces away, and was desperate to get inside. Her legs were bouncing up and down, wrinkling the blue dress she’d donned for the occasion.

Hopper knew there was no use in getting her to listen when she was this distracted. She’d been counting down the days in excitement ever since he told her she could go to the Snow Ball. *Well*, he thought, *it’s better she counts down days than counting up.*

“No, not okay, I need you to listen. I know Owens said it was fine, but it could still be dangerous in there.” El’s eyes were still fixed on the window but he continued nonetheless, “I’ll be waiting in the parking lot the whole time. If any adult even *looks* at you funny, I want you to find me. And if you can’t find me, then look for Joyce, or Jonathan, I think she mentioned he was coming.”

“Find you if something happens, got it!” The song coming from the gym had switched to a new one. This one was slower, Hop was pretty sure it was Cyndi Lauper or some other new age pop star he didn’t care for. “Can I go now?”

El finally turned to him with those puppy dog eyes and the begging tone he’d gotten pretty good at learning to resist, but tonight wasn’t the night for that. This was her night out, no need to hold her off from her fun anymore, “Yeah, sure kid.”

He went to ruffle her hair but stopped himself, figuring she’d probably throw another telekinetic tantrum if he messed it up after she spent an hour in the bathroom earlier attempting to tame her curls.

She gave him one of the biggest smiles he’d ever seen her wear and Hop felt like the proudest man on the planet right then. He wasn’t sure what there was to be so proud of in just going to a school dance,

but he looked at the girl who might as well be his daughter and felt his heart swell with her enjoyment.

El reached to grab his hand, giving him a squeeze goodbye before jumping up to open the car door.

But Hop's eyes were still focused on her hand. Namely, on the spot right below her hand with dark numbers inked onto her skin. *Shit.*

He knew he'd forgotten something. All of this was so dangerous, just letting her out of the cabin there were a hundred things that could go wrong at any second. Of course he'd forgotten something that could make all of this go to hell. If one person saw that tattoo and rumors started to spread...

"Kid, wait!" He called for her, and she turned around with those big eyes that made the weight in his chest all the heavier. She was so small, and she looked adorable in that dress she cherished ever since he brought it home for her. She was so excited for tonight, how could he crush her dreams all over something so tiny, something she'd never be able to help?

El cocked her head to the side, and Hopper knew he couldn't do it. She was a 13 year old girl, he was going to make sure she got to her middle school dance for God's sake. He wasn't going to let some tattoo she'd have for the rest of her life stop that.

He had to cover it somehow, though, he couldn't let her walk in there with '011' quite literally plastered over her skin.

"Come here," he motioned her over, "I need to give you something."

His eyes fell to the bracelet around his own wrist and suddenly felt as if his heart was in his throat. He remembered Sara wearing it in her hair everyday. He remembered helping her tie up her pigtails. He remembered her face while lying in the hospital bed when her hair began falling out, and he'd worn the ribbon every day since.

Sara, who never even made it to 13 years old, who'd never gotten the chance to beg him to let her leave the car so she could walk in to her first school dance. El wasn't Sara, but looking at the wide-eyed girl

sitting in the passenger seat, he knew she had him wrapped around her finger just as Sara once had.

He wasn't sure exactly what his relationship with El was. He was her legal guardian now, but the fact that now he had her name on a little slip of paper didn't change things in the slightest for the two of them. They were still just regular El and Hop. They stayed up late watching scary movies Hopper knew she shouldn't be allowed to see. He made Eggos for her in the morning, and at night forced her to eat her peas. He bought school books and helped teach her new words and math lessons, and read her stories before bed.

Hopper wasn't sure if she was technically his daughter, but she was definitely his family.

Hopper's family used to be Sara and Diane. He thought he was going to spend the rest of his life with Diane and watch Sara grow up herself, maybe give him some grandkids to join the family one day. He thought the 3 of them would last forever. Nowadays he wasn't as naive, he knew family could come and go out of your life and it was impossible to know who would really be there forever. He'd known that before taking in El, but ever since then he'd been infinitely more aware of it. He knew how easily she could slip between his fingers, so he'd held onto her as tightly as he could.

This stubborn, strong-willed, telekinetic teenager was his family now. And Hopper would do anything to protect this little family he'd stumbled into.

"Your tattoo, we need to cover it." Hopper pointed to the numbers on her wrist, and El looked down self-consciously. Her fingers grazed over the ink, wishing desperately that she could just will away the reminder of the fact she wasn't normal. Her smile dropped and her heart fell to her stomach.

"I've got something for you." With shaking hands, Hop took the bracelet off his own wrist and wrapped it around the small hand next to him, "This can hide it."

El's eyes widened looking down at the bracelet, and Hopper grinned, "Perfect. It matches your dress and everything."

She turned to her maybe-father in awe. A small smile graced her lips and Hopper felt his heart soar. He thought it would hurt to give El the bracelet, but it didn't. It felt like a weight lifted off his chest, like he was finally accepting that the past was over and this life, this family, this girl was the present.

He leaned over her and opened the car door, "Now go have fun, okay? Say hi to your friends for me."

El looked back and forth between the door opened a crack and Hopper, her mouth still opened slightly, and unaware of what she's supposed to say. Instead of saying anything, she elected to lean over to give him a quick hug, making sure not to wrinkle her dress or mess up her hair in the process, but still holding onto him as tight as she could. "Thank you," she whispered, and she didn't need to clarify for Hopper to know it was about so much more than just the bracelet.

Just as suddenly as she dove into the hug, she pulled away, hopping out the car door with a grin and waving goodbye before walking towards the school. That Cyndi Lauper song was almost ending now, and El was ready to see her friends.